

# Léon Goossens and the Oboe Quintets of Arnold Bax (1922) and Arthur Bliss (1927)

By  
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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Music and the Graduate Faculty  
of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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Léon Goossens and the Oboe Quintets of  
Arnold Bax (1922) and Arthur Bliss (1927)

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## **Abstract**

Léon Goossens's virtuosity, musicality, and developments in playing the oboe expressively earned him a reputation as one of history's finest oboists. His artistry and tone inspired British composers in the early twentieth century to consider the oboe a viable solo instrument once again. Goossens became a very popular and influential figure among composers, and many works are dedicated to him. His interest in having new music written for oboe and strings led to several prominent pieces, the earliest among them being the oboe quintets of Arnold Bax (1922) and Arthur Bliss (1927).

Bax's music is strongly influenced by German romanticism and the music of Edward Elgar. This led critics to describe his music as old-fashioned and out of touch, as it was not intellectual enough for critics, nor was it aesthetically pleasing to the masses. His obsession with the poetry of William Butler Yeats led him to discover his true love for Ireland and Celtic culture, and inspired him to include Irish-like folk melodies of his own creation in the piece. His Quintet written for Goossens has its critics, but remains a staple of the oboe literature.

Arthur Bliss's relationship with Goossens began after Bliss met Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge during a visit to the United States. It was during this time that she commissioned Bliss to write his Quintet for Oboe and Strings. As a soldier in the trenches during the Great War, Bliss learned to appreciate beauty in the smallest things, as they could be taken away in an instant. Bliss was considered more of a modernist than Bax, but he was able to write modern music with more pleasant romantic touches. Bliss's wide range of textures and effects, long melodies, and the clever inclusion of an Irish jig made for a challenging piece worthy of Goossens's talent.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project and everything I have accomplished in pursuit of my doctorate would not have happened without the support of several individuals. I would like to start by thanking Dr. Margaret Marco for everything she has done for me the past three years. I would not be the musician I am now without your guidance, invaluable advice, and the plethora of opportunities you have provided. I would also like to express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Colin Roust. His generosity, enthusiasm, and expertise have been invaluable in developing this project into what it is. The members of my graduate committee, Dr. Eric Stomberg, Dr. Sarah Frisof, and Dr. Michelle Hayes, have all been wonderful in overseeing the progress of my education.

I would also like to thank my mother and sister. Thank you both so much for your unending support of my music and your unending love. If it weren't for you both, I would not be the person I am today. To Avery: Thank you for being my biggest fan and reminding me of the important things in life. To my friends James, Drew, and Brandon: Thank you for keeping me grounded in reality and for never changing.



## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Tables .....	vi
List of Figures.....	vi
Léon Goossens.....	1
Arnold Bax .....	4
Quintet, First Movement .....	6
Quintet, Second Movement .....	9
Quintet, Third Movement .....	12
Final Thoughts.....	15
Arthur Bliss .....	16
Quintet for Oboe and Strings, First Movement .....	18
Quintet for Oboe and Strings, Second Movement.....	21
Quintet for Oboe and Strings, Third Movement .....	26
Final Thoughts.....	32
Conclusions .....	32
Bibliography .....	34

## List of Tables

Table 1: Form of Bax, Oboe Quintet, third movement .....	13
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## List of Figures

Figure 1: Opening measures of the first oboe melody, establishing G harmonic minor. Bax, Quintet, first movement, mm. 3-5 .....	6
Figure 2: Bax, Quintet, first movement, mm. 41–44.....	7
Figure 3: Simultaneous E-flat major and D-flat major triads. Bax, Quintet, mm. 68-70.....	9
Figure 4: Theme A in the first violin. Bax, Quintet, second movement, mm. 5–12 .....	10
Figure 5: First occurrence of Theme B, in G phrygian. Bax, Quintet, movement 2, m. 41 ..	10
Figure 6: Theme C as introduced by the viola. Bax, Quintet, second movement, mm. 42–47 .....	11
Figure 7: Theme A played by the oboe. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 9-15 .....	13
Figure 8: Theme B played by the oboe. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 23-29 .....	14
Figure 9: Theme C played by the oboe. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 60-64 .....	14
Figure 10: Theme D played by the oboe and first violin. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 116-124 .....	14
Figure 11: The ostinati in section B beginning in m. 57. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 58-62 .....	15
Figure 12: Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, first movement, mm. 1-4 .....	18
Figure 13: Theme B played by the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, first movement, mm. 47-50 .....	19
Figure 14. The oboe melody under a single slur. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, first movement, mm. 60-66 .....	20
Figure 15: Heavily ornamented oboe part. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, first movement, mm. 23-26 .....	21
Figure 16: Opening melody played by the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 1-9.....	22

Figure 17: Theme B first played by the violin. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 65-69 .....	22
Figure 18: The oboe's highly controlled ornamentation. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 136-141 .....	23
Figure 19: The closing melody played by the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 149-153 .....	23
Figure 20: Alternating hollow ostinati in the strings. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 36-40 .....	25
Figure 21: The oboe's chromatic melody after the strings. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 29-33 .....	26
Figure 22: The oboe's 2/4 melody with 6/8 string accompaniment. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 48-51 .....	27
Figure 23: "Connelly's Jig" in the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 95-99 .....	28
Figure 24: The final driving oboe motive until the end of the movement. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 348-353 .....	28
Figure 25: Sudden register and texture changes in strings. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 192-198 .....	30
Figure 26: Written ornamentation in the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movements, mm. 168-174 .....	31

## **Léon Goossens and the The Oboe Quintets of Arnold Bax (1922) and Arthur Bliss (1927)**

Léon Goossens (1897-1988) is credited with transforming “the oboe from a necessary, but often unpleasant, bleating noise in the orchestra to an instrument capable of producing unimagined refinement and beauty of tone.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed there is no shortage of praise for his playing. The well-respected English oboist Neil Black once said in an interview that Goossens was solely responsible for the degree of respect that the oboe enjoys today as a solo instrument; he further claimed that everyone in oboe circles still knows his name.<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Rothwell said that Goossens’s style of playing was full of life and vigor, unlike the “dead, reedy and rather ugly sound which was generally accepted before his time.”<sup>3</sup>

But what about Goossens’s oboe playing made it so noteworthy and desirable? His tone quality alone was praised for being very sweet, delicate, and flexible. Other British oboists of the time were criticized for having an overly harsh sound that was too loud. He was able to accomplish this more desirable tone by developing a flexible short scrape reed that was much lighter than the ones other players used, and certainly lighter than American long scrape reeds.<sup>4</sup> While on tour in Leningrad, Goossens met two Estonian oboists who had traveled over two hundred miles just to hear him play. The day after the concert, he met with them to give them

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<sup>1</sup> Carole Rosen, *The Goossens: A Musical Century* (Boston: Northeastern, 1994), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Aryn Day Sweeney, “An Afternoon’s Conversation with Neil Black,” *The Double Reed* 29, no. 1 (2006): 108.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Burgess, *The Oboe*, The Yale Musical Instrument Series (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 197.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Lindsey Campbell Bailey, “Léon Goossens’s Impact on Twentieth-Century English Oboe Repertoire: ‘Phantasy Quartet’ of Benjamin Britten, Concerto for Oboe and Strings of Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Sonata for Oboe of York Bowen” (D.M.A., University of Cincinnati, 2010), 20–21, 24.

reeds and discuss how he was able to produce such a nice tone while managing so many technically challenging passages.<sup>5</sup>

Another aspect of Goossens's playing that set him apart from other oboists was his use of breath vibrato. Because oboists at the turn of the twentieth century seldom used vibrato as a means of expression, he encountered resistance to this practice from his fellow orchestra members, though critics and conductors liked it.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by violin virtuosos, he would increase and decrease the intensity of the vibrato as a way to help shape a phrase. By the mid-twentieth century, most British oboists had adopted a prominent, wide vibrato.<sup>7</sup>

As a highly sought-after performer and teacher, Goossens was on the faculty of both the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music. As an instructor at the two most prominent schools of music in the country, Goossens left a lasting legacy among oboe players in Britain. Some of his students would go on to be highly esteemed and notable oboists in their own right, including Evelyn Rothwell and Terence Macdonagh.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to Goossens's rise to fame, few oboists were able to make a living as soloists. The final decades of the nineteenth century saw the decline of the oboe virtuoso. Apollo Marie-Rose Barret and Paris Conservatoire professor Charles Colin died, Antonino Pasculli retired, and younger players were not able to match their caliber. Most oboists "took refuge in the more fertile ground provided by the orchestras."<sup>9</sup> The highly skilled Goossens found the role of an

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<sup>5</sup> Rosen, *The Goossens*, 320.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell Bailey, "Léon Goossens's Impact," 27–28.

<sup>7</sup> Burgess, *The Oboe*, 263.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell Bailey, "Léon Goossens's Impact," 17.

<sup>9</sup> Burgess, *The Oboe*, 191.

orchestral oboist tedious, and his antics during rehearsals and concerts eventually earned him a strongly-worded reprimand from his director.<sup>10</sup>

Eventually his exploration of extant solo and chamber oboe repertoire, as well as his status as a fine oboist, encouraged composers to consider the oboe a solo instrument once again. Since Goossens found himself in a position to actively commission and perform new works, he is largely responsible for reintroducing the oboe as a solo instrument. He collaborated with several notable composers associated with the English Musical Renaissance, which was the movement to establish a national musical identity and separate Britain from European influences. Composers associated with this movement include Benjamin Britten, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, and Léon's brother Eugene Goossens.<sup>11</sup> These composers, who left a lasting legacy in Britain's musical culture, all collaborated with Léon Goossens.

Many solo works were written for Goossens, as were many chamber music pieces. Composers wrote works for the combination of oboe and string trio or quartet until the 1820s, but the genre virtually disappeared during the remainder of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Goossens had led a revival of Mozart's Quartet for Oboe, Violin, Viola, and Violoncello, K. 370, and became a champion of the work. He expressed interest in new modern companion pieces that followed in its instrumentation, which led to many new works for oboe and strings.<sup>13</sup> Some of these works included Elizabeth Maconchy's Quintet for Oboe and Strings (1932), Benjamin Britten's *Phantasy* Quartet (1935), *Gerald Finzi's Interlude* for Oboe and String Quartet (1936), Gordon Jacob's Quartet (1938), Earnest James Moeran's *Fantasy* Quartet for Oboe and Strings

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<sup>10</sup> Rosen, *The Goossens*, 125.

<sup>11</sup> Burgess, *The Oboe*, 209.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

(1946), William Wordsworth's Quartet for Oboe and Strings (1951), and Malcom Arnold's Oboe Quartet (1957). All of these works were written for Goossens.<sup>14</sup>

Two notable precursors to these works, however, were the oboe quintets by Arnold Bax (1883-1953) and Arthur Bliss (1891-1975), also written for Goossens. Not since Mozart had there been such an interest in chamber music for oboe and strings, and this is due in no small part to the artistry and charisma of Léon Goossens.<sup>15</sup> Through his ability and enthusiasm, composers had a new medium to express their creativity. The remainder of this document will be a close analysis of the oboe quintets by Bax and Bliss using the procedures outlined in Jan LaRue's *Guidelines for Style Analysis*.

#### Arnold Bax, Quintet

Although Bax was well respected in his day, he is largely underappreciated today. Bax was more modernist in orientation than many of his British contemporaries, such as Vaughan Williams. However, his music was never considered so modern as to lose its essentially British qualities.<sup>16</sup> The thematic material Bax wrote was usually very diatonic, but his harmonic language was more complex. His exploration of color, harmony, and use of sonorities such as 9<sup>th</sup> chords or unprepared suspensions made it difficult for audiences to appreciate his use of older classical forms. As a result, his popularity suffered.<sup>17</sup>

Arnold Bax, unlike a majority of British composers in the English Musical Renaissance, continued to be influenced by German romantics like Wagner and Strauss. Though he would later idolize Edward Elgar's music, the biggest influence in his life was the poetry of William

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<sup>14</sup> Campbell Bailey, "Léon Goossens's Impact," 220–221.

<sup>15</sup> Burgess, *The Oboe*, 209.

<sup>16</sup> Peter J. Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Gollancz, 1979), 76.

<sup>17</sup> A. L. Bacharach, ed., *British Music of Our Time* (New York: Pelican Books, 1946), 116.

Butler Yeats.<sup>18</sup> Yeats's poetry was powerful enough to Bax to make him consider a career in literature instead of music.<sup>19</sup> Many years after discovering the poetry of Yeats, Bax said that his poetry "means more to me than all the music of the centuries."<sup>20</sup> Through Yeats's writings, Bax became obsessed with Ireland and Celtic culture. He spent many summers in a remote village in Ireland, away from cities and as close to open landscapes as possible. Arthur Bliss noted that this corresponded with Bax's awakened feelings and true inner self.<sup>21</sup> Bax's fascination with Ireland manifests itself in a number of ways in his Quintet, most notably in the folk-like melodies heard in third movement. Although they are wholly original melodies, he appears to have taken inspiration from "The Lament of the Sons of Usna."<sup>22</sup>

Bax and Goossens became acquainted in 1914, when an orchestra led by Edward Clark was presenting programs of contemporary music. They performed Bax's song-cycle *The Bard of the Dimbovitza*, and Goossens was the principal oboist.<sup>23</sup> Goossens commissioned the Oboe Quintet in the early 1920s and Bax completed it by the end of 1922, in the midst of completing the orchestration for his First Symphony. Writing the piece for Goossens must have felt like a reprieve from the demands of completing a symphony, because he finished the work in a very short amount of time. One of Bax's biographers, Lewis Foreman, has also noted the influence of symphonic orchestration on the variety of textures employed in the Quintet.<sup>24</sup>

Arguably, Bax's Quintet is a significant chamber piece for the oboe, but its reception throughout history has been mixed. Historian Peter Pirie called the work a "rather vapid product

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis Foreman, *Bax: A Composer and His Times*, 3rd revised & expanded ed (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2007), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember* (London: Faber, 1970), xxvi.

<sup>22</sup> Foreman, *Bax*, 212.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 212.



of Bax's early obsession with Ireland," and "rather fey."<sup>25</sup> Musical writer Alfred Louis Bacharach, on the other hand, wrote that it was a "charming and unpretentious work...cast in an Arcadian mood..."<sup>26</sup> Carole Rosen, who wrote a history of the Goossens family, considers it the "first work of major significance" for Goossens, and notes that it exploits "the liveliness of Léon's playing."<sup>27</sup>

### Bax, Quintet, First Movement

The first movement of Bax's Quintet is characterized by sudden shifts in tonality, tempo, and volume. Bax frequently alters modes and chord combinations, changing the mood quickly from dark to bright and vice versa.

*Melody.* The opening sultry melody played by the oboe starting in measure 3 sets the stage for a wandering and quasi-improvisatory movement (see figure 1). The solo oboe establishes G minor as the home key, but the tonal center begins to shift by the time the oboe is done playing this melody. The first twenty measures of the movement alternate the dark and bright timbres that the oboe and string quartet can produce.

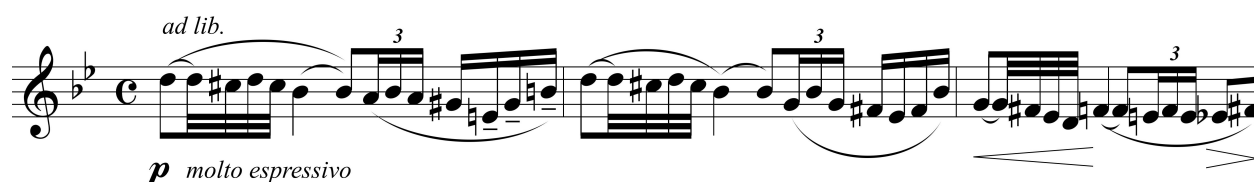


Figure 1: Opening measures of the first oboe melody, establishing G harmonic minor. Bax, Quintet, first movement, mm. 3-5.

<sup>25</sup> Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 114.

<sup>26</sup> Bacharach, *British Music of Our Time*, 126.

<sup>27</sup> Rosen, *The Goossens*, 126–127.

The oboe solo in measure 41 (see Figure 2) is a modal melody that is indicated to be played “roughly,” an unusual expressive marking that is not the first of its kind in the piece. Bax also asks the oboe to play “shrill” just before this section in measure 36. This passage stands directly opposed to what happens later in measure 75, when Bax requires the oboe to play at the top of its effective range (E<sup>6</sup> and F<sup>#6</sup>) at *pianissimo*, *dolcissimo* and *senza crescendo*. At this point in the movement, the mood has become bright and calm again, and this is ushered in by the oboe’s high tessitura. This sort of writing is very demanding of an oboist, and can only be properly executed by a skilled performer.

The remainder of the movement (measures 79-94) can be considered a recapitulation and brief coda. Bax has brought back the original melody in abbreviated forms, and has turned the opening section’s G minor into a brighter and more tranquil G major.

Figure 2: Bax, Quintet, first movement, mm. 41–44.

*Texture.* While the oboe is the featured instrument in this chamber piece, each individual part contributes in significant ways to the piece's sound and texture. Melodic lines shift in timbre very quickly as they move from one instrument to another, and the string instruments frequently change from *arco* to *pizzicato* and back again. Timbral shifts like these often serve as markers of a new section. In the opening section of the piece, for example, the string quartet trades off long chords with a constantly moving rhythmic line or with pieces of the oboe melody shown in figure 1. Then in measure 31, the string quartet moves homophonically in parallel fourths. This motion gives way to a short transitional oboe solo that ushers in the second main section of the movement, which begins in measure 41 (see figure 2).

Supporting the solo oboe, each member of the string quartet plays a different ostinato, introducing new dissonant material. The D-centered ostinato in the upper strings clashes with the cello's sustained E-flats. However, the differences in range and articulation between the instruments soften the effect of the dissonance. The juxtaposition of D and E-flat continues throughout this movement, culminating in the string quartet playing simultaneous D flat and E flat major chords (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Simultaneous E-flat major and D-flat major triads. Bax, Quintet, mm. 68-70.

While the overall effect of the movement's brighter and calmer moments may sound open and freely expressive to the listener, this is the result of carefully constructed composition. There is scarcely a measure that does not have a particular dynamic, expression instruction, or articulation marked.

### Bax, Quintet, Second Movement

The second movement begins in stark contrast to the first. The oboe is tacet throughout the first forty measures while the string quartet plays a lush introduction. This opening section features an asymmetrical time signature that alternates between 4/8 and 3/8.

*Melody.* The first violin introduces theme A, which is then handed over to the viola and back to the first violin to end the section. Bax establishes C minor with cadences that modulate to

the relative major of E-flat. Though the music sounds very free and effortless, Bax meticulously notates the articulations, as can be seen in figure 4.

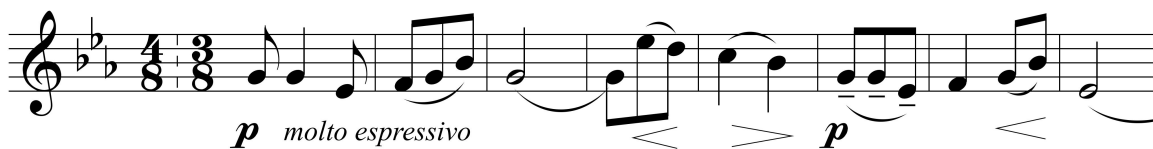


Figure 4: Theme A in the first violin. Bax, Quintet, second movement, mm. 5–12.

The oboe does not play theme A until the final section of the piece, in measure 94. However, when it does play this melody, it carries the tune in its entirety until the final measures of the movement. This section is in the original established key, and also returns to the alternating 4/8 and 3/8 meters.

The oboe introduces theme B when it enters in measure 41 (see figure 5). The motive is elaborated in a cadenza-like style in a single measure marked “senza Tempo” and with the oboe instructed to play “ad lib.” This improvisatory melody is heard as a contrast from the alternating time signatures and the aggressive ostinato of the first section.

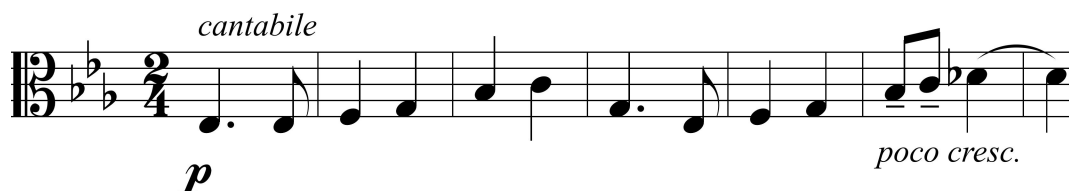


Figure 5: First occurrence of Theme B, in G phrygian. Bax, Quintet, movement 2, m. 41.

Theme B appears three more times throughout the movement, in a different harmonic context each time. In measure 53, it is a half step higher in E dorian, accompanied by a sustained

C-sharp half-diminished-seventh chord in the strings. It returns again in measure 62, outlining a pentatonic scale in the oboe's high register as the string quartet sustains all five pitches of the scale simultaneously. Finally, theme B is heard in measure 72 in abbreviated fashion. The melody is again in the oboe's low register with a tonal center of D, but this time Bax notates it in 2/4 meter.

Opposing the improvisatory nature of theme B is theme C, which sounds very simple and folk-like (see figure 6). This comparatively simple melody occurs in some form after every appearance of theme B. The viola introduces the melody in measure 43, but the first violin plays all subsequent appearances. At the same time the viola plays this theme, the cello is playing pizzicato parallel fifths. This practice is a dramatic shift from the suspensions and passing tones of the first main section.



passing tones, which Bax uses to destabilize the tonal center. The *molto espressivo* marking is reinforced through dynamic swells, such as in the fourth and fifth measures of figure 4.

What follows the quartet feature is theme B in the oboe, which is played alone. Mirroring the string quartet's full, rich sound in the first forty measures, Bax takes full advantage of the oboe's resonant low register with the initial presentation of theme B. Each appearance of theme B in the oboe can be considered a large swell and a build-up to the moments before the return of theme A in measure 94.

Bax interspersed comparatively thin-textured music in between these rich moments, such as the accompaniment for the viola's theme C in measure 42, which features only the cello's *pizzicato* parallel fifths. While not as empty as measure 42, the soft ostinati, *pizzicato*, and *sul ponticello* in the quartet at measure 94 create a texture that feels like it is skimming the surface of tone. Additionally, Bax increases the density of sound with each occurrence of the oboe's theme by including sustained chords in the strings, though these generate a certain "flat" quality as they are played without vibrato.

#### Bax, Quintet, Third Movement

The form of the third movement is summarized in table 1 below. When broken down and organized in this manner, the third movement appears as a tightly organized finale to the piece. Bax establishes the tonal centers of each section through the bass and ostinato lines of the cello and the melody of the oboe. The composer solidifies the key of G major in the A section, but shifts to E dorian and D aeolian for the folk-like melodies of the B section.

Section	A	Transition	B	Transition	B'	A'	Coda
Measures	1-43	44-56	57-130	131-138	139-164	165-205	206-230
Key	G major		E dorian		D aeolian	G major	C <sup>9</sup> → G major
Themes	A, B		C, C', D		D	B, A	D, A'

Table 1: Form of Bax, Oboe Quintet, third movement.

*Melody.* The movement features four themes. Theme A (see figure 7) is an original melody evocative of an Irish jig. Theme B (see figure 8) acts as a countermelody to theme A as both melodies are played simultaneously. Theme B is presented by the oboe immediately after the conclusion of theme A, and it contrasts with theme A in several ways, including the meter, style, and articulation. The oboe and the viola play together at the first presentation of this melody as well. Theme C (see figure 9) is similar to theme A in meter, tempo, and the dance-like feel, which perhaps evokes imagery of the uilleann pipes. Theme D (see figure 10) is the climactic melody of the movement, featuring forte dynamics in each member of the ensemble. The oboe and first violin play this dorian-mode melody in unison, while the second violin, viola, and cello each play their own independent ostinati. In the B' section, the theme returns in the upper register of the cello.



Figure 7: Theme A played by the oboe. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 9-15.





Figure 8: Theme B played by the oboe. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 23-29.



Figure 9: Theme C played by the oboe. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 60-64.



Figure 10: Theme D played by the oboe and first violin. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 116-124.

With the exception of the introductory measures and the transitions, Bax makes sure to have one of these melodies present at all times. Each new presentation of a theme is different, be it with increased rhythmic complexity, a change in tonality, or clever use of an instrument's register. In the case of the coda, Bax abbreviates two established motives and alters the original theme in a way that drives the music to its finale.

*Texture.* The texture of this movement varies from section to section, and evolves just as quickly as the themes change. Pizzicato strings on the beats in 6/8 time precede theme A in the oboe and continue until theme B enters. Both themes are played simultaneously as theme A is taken over by the first violin, and the combination of this lively staccato melody and the melismatic slurring in theme B make for a noticeable contrast.

Section B presents the listener with a variety of individual ostinati in the strings that combine to form the backbone for the oboe, which is playing theme C (see figure 11). The cello plays a repeated ascending arpeggio from its low range while the first violin has very high short octave notes. Meanwhile, the second violin has repeated double-stop pizzicato quarter notes.

Also, Bax writes the oboe melody and cello ostinato in 6/8, while the rest of the ensemble is in 2/4.

Figure 11: The ostinati in section B beginning in m. 57. Bax, Quintet, third movement, mm. 58-62.

The texture is densest during the climactic phrases of the movement in mm. 117-132. The one place at which all five instruments play homogenous rhythms is m. 131. These accented quarter notes are marked “Deciso,” and have the same dynamic level. Bax immediately contrasts this heavily orchestrated climax with muted strings at the beginning of section B'. Another distinct contrast in this section is that the cello plays the melody while the oboe takes on an accompanimental role. Apart from this moment, the oboe is the primary melodic instrument whenever it is playing.

In all three movements, Bax’s Quintet centers on several key motives that either exude a folk-like quality or showcase the oboe player’s artistic ability. The main themes differ from

movement to movement, as does the texture of the ensemble. One prevailing technique that Bax carries over in each movement is his use of ostinati in the string quartet. Each ostinato throughout the piece accompanies an oboe melody, and these ostinati explore a variety of textures as the piece progresses, whether through articulation, register effects, or multiple simultaneous meters.

### Arthur Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings

Arthur Bliss's compositional output spans many different styles and influences. His earlier works from the late 1910s and early 1920s show an influence of the French avant-garde and Les Six, while works from the mid-1930s demonstrate neoclassicism. Igor Stravinsky was a powerful influence in the musical world by the early 1920s, and his blend of Russian and French styles was spreading across Europe. Bliss, along with William Walton and Eugene Goossens, was among the first English composers to adopt the "fashionable" Franco-Russian style.<sup>28</sup>

Bliss would also occasionally pay respect to music of the past with works scattered throughout his career, such as the *Purcell Suite* (1921). Bliss had an ability to quickly recognize and assimilate musical trends, altering them to suit his desires. Otto Karolyi said that Bliss was "a populizer of modernism in England by virtue of the fact that he diluted it with easily palatable romantic flavors."<sup>29</sup> As a soldier in the trenches during World War I, Bliss came to appreciate the smallest peaceful moments of beauty, as sudden death was a very real possibility.<sup>30</sup> His

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<sup>28</sup> Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 105.

<sup>29</sup> Otto Karolyi, *Modern British Music: The Second British Musical Renaissance--from Elgar to P. Maxwell Davies* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), 42.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Saylor, "'It's Not Lambkins Frisking At All': English Pastoral Music and the Great War," *The Musical Quarterly* 91, no. 1–2 (March 20, 2008): 42–43, doi:10.1093/musqtl/gdn030.

moments of romanticism and consonance mixed with more modern chromatic tensions allude to his wartime experience.

Bliss was also inspired by his collaborations with great artists. Bliss was able to flourish creatively when his music was written for virtuoso performers, such as Léon Goossens. Additionally, his Clarinet Quintet, Piano Sonata, and Violin Concerto were all written for particular artists. Bliss's biographer Stewart Craggs has suggested that Bliss found it easier to write music for admired collaborators.<sup>31</sup>

The commissioning of the Quintet for Oboe and Strings was not by Léon Goossens, but by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a very wealthy and famous patroness of the arts who knew a great deal about music and was a musician herself. Her music festivals were notable, and she commissioned works by many of the leading composers of the early to mid-twentieth century, including Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, and Stravinsky.<sup>32</sup> Bliss met Mrs. Coolidge during his first trip to the United States, where they were both attending a concert by the Pro Arte Quartet hosted by another wealthy patroness of the arts. The quartet had been sent to the housekeeper's room for dinner and Bliss joined them since he was their friend. Mrs. Coolidge also joined them, aggravated at how the event's host could treat the musicians in such a way.

It was then that Mrs. Coolidge asked Bliss to write a "special work" for her 1927 Festival in Venice. He set to work immediately, writing later "It is always a joy to write with a superlative artist in mind, and besides the sound of the oboe with strings is exquisite."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Stewart R. Craggs, ed., *Arthur Bliss: Music and Literature* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002), 114.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>33</sup> Bliss, *As I Remember*, 91.

# Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, First Movement

*Melody.* Bliss begins the first movement with the violins playing theme A in thirds (see figure 12). The cello plays an abbreviated version of the melody beginning in measure 15, but it is not until the oboe enters in measure 20 that the melody is presented in a soloistic manner without parallel harmonization. Theme A consists of large upward and downward intervals that require great care to shape a coherent phrase. The consistent downward minor sixth and upward minor seventh intervals add an air of unpredictability to the music, but through repetition it becomes anticipated throughout the movement. Theme A is presented almost constantly throughout the movement in a variety of ornamented and abbreviated formats. Throughout the movement's tempo, meter, and texture changes, theme A serves as an anchor onto which the performers and audience can grasp. However, the harmonized opening in measure 1 presents uncertainty as the melody moves through the high range of the two violins.

**Assai Sostenuto** ♩ = 60

Vln. I

***p** legato e cantabile*

Vln. II

***p** legato e cantabile*

The image shows the first four measures of a musical score for Violin I and Violin II. The tempo is 'Assai Sostenuto' with a metronome marking of 60. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The time signature changes from 4/4 to 3/4 and back to 4/4. Both parts are marked 'p' (piano) and 'legato e cantabile'. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accidentals, with a repeat sign at the end of the fourth measure.

Figure 12: Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, first movement, mm. 1-4.

The second recurring melody in the first movement (theme B) appears just twice. The oboe plays the melody both times while the strings play *pizzicato* quarter notes (see figure 13). Theme B first appears in measure 47 and then again in a slightly altered format in measure 160.

In both instances, a member of the string quartet repeats the theme directly after the oboe has finished. While it appears much less frequently than theme A, theme B serves the important function of introducing a new section of the movement in its first instance, and then signaling the closing section in its second.

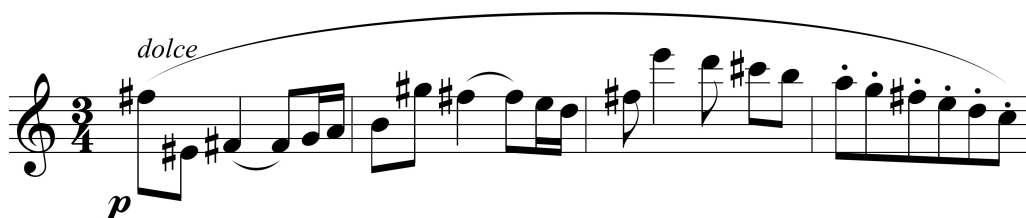


Figure 13: Theme B played by the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, first movement, mm. 47-50.

*Texture.* Bliss must have had intimate knowledge of the string instruments, because he was able to bring out a variety of sounds from the quartet. Rarely does Bliss have the string quartet playing anything homophonically or with an equal weight and articulation. The seemingly independent parts and effects in the strings paint an overall picture when combined. Bliss uses the sheer variety of textures as a way of creating contrast between sections. For instance, the first nineteen measures present a full-bodied string sound with legato bowing and counterpoint among the four voices. The faster *Allegro assai agitato* section beginning in measure 60, on the other hand, consists of frequent tremolos, staccato sixteenth notes, and heavy accents.

Another important observation is the articulation of the oboe part is significantly different from that of the string quartet. While the string parts have slurs written over several distinct parts of theme A, the oboe usually has one over-arching slur over the entirety of the melody (see figure 14). This practice is not exclusive to the first movement, as the other movements also have

the oboe playing long phrases under one slur. These long slurs can present a technical challenge to oboists, as many of Bliss's long phrases contain rapid stepwise or arpeggiated motion. Perhaps this was a way for Bliss to completely control when the oboist would breathe. It is very likely that Bliss wanted to create a contrast between the melodic lines in the oboe and strings. The string melodies are articulated while the oboe's line is smooth and florid.

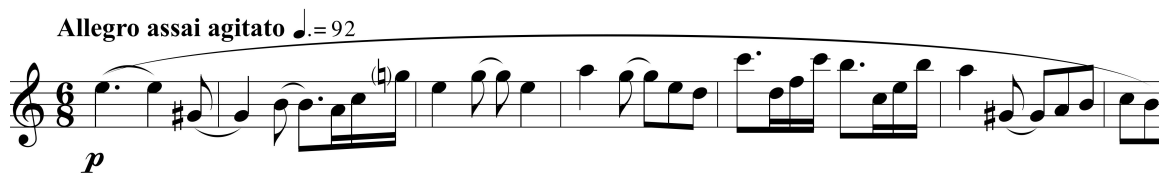


Figure 14. The oboe melody under a single slur. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, first movement, mm. 60-66.

*Rhythm.* One of the main techniques Bliss utilizes in the development of this piece is the variety of rhythm. The melody itself is presented in two ways throughout the movement that keep the material fresh while also keeping the music grounded in familiarity (see figures 12 and 14 above). Figures 12 and 14 are the same melody, but altered to fit in different meters and tempos. Additionally, Bliss elaborates on the melody with extensive ornamentation (see figure 15). This technique is very virtuosic, and requires a great deal of care to be accurately performed. This technique is also not exclusive to the first movement, as Bliss makes great technical demands to the oboist in later movements.

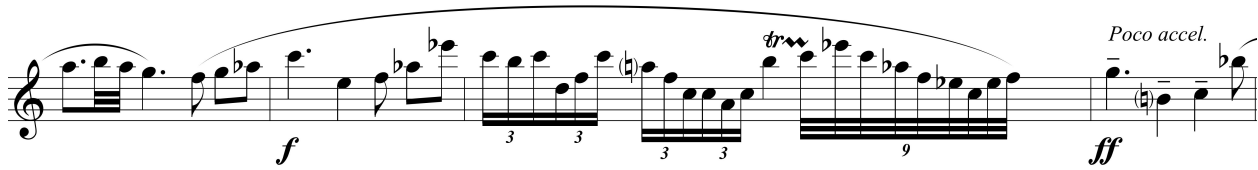


Figure 15: Heavily ornamented oboe part. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, first movement, mm. 23-26.

This movement is also full of syncopation and hemiola. Bliss frequently displaces theme A by an eighth note, and the bar lines do not serve as an indicator of phrasing. In the *Allegro assai agitato* section beginning in measure 60, the composer may make the listener think there are frequent meter changes, but through the use of ties, he is able to achieve this effect without alternating between duple and triple meter.

#### Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, Second Movement

The second movement of Bliss' Quintet is a slower movement; beginning with *Andante con moto* at quarter note equals 69. There are many similarities between it and the first movement in terms of structure, but there is no thematic or melodic connection between them.

*Melody.* The opening measure of the movement presents the oboe with a very long, wandering melody that seemingly has no end. Bliss has carried through his practice of writing in long slurs over the entire passage to control where the oboist breathes and where the phrase can end (see figure 16). The slurs also serve to elide the conclusion of a phrase directly into the beginning of another, as strong cadential arrivals are rare in this movement.





Figure 16: Opening melody played by the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 1-9.

Theme A is presented in several derivations throughout the movement, such as one octave higher in the oboe in measure 38, transposed down a third in measure 55, unison octaves with the first violin at the climactic moment in measure 99, and a tranquillo variation in measure 115, following the climax. For a brief moment in measure 112, the violins play it in thirds, much like the very opening of the first movement.

The second important recurring melody, theme B, is the driving melody for the *Allegro moderato* section beginning in measure 63. The strings present this dolce melody in measure 65, where the first violin and viola trade off phrases until the oboe takes over in measure 76 (see figure 17). The main differences between theme A and theme B are rhythm, tempo and meter. Though the ensemble is driving rhythmically, Bliss's instruction of *dolce* indicates a connection to the calm and melismatic theme A from the opening.

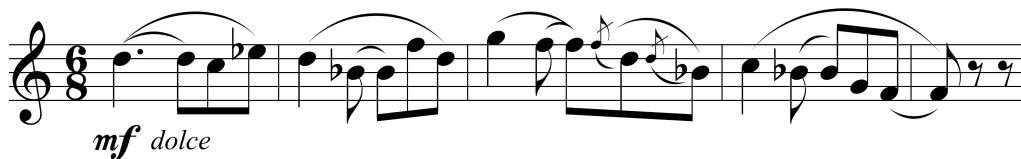


Figure 17: Theme B first played by the violin. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 65-69.

The oboe melody beginning in measure 136 is another example of Bliss's technique of composing ornaments for the soloist. The overall effect is that of virtuosic improvisatory

technique, while in reality Bliss is being very controlling and exact with his notation (see figure 18).



Figure 18: The oboe's highly controlled ornamentation. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 136-141.

Alternatively, Bliss' ending for the movement has the strings come almost to a halt with long non-vibrato chords while the oboe plays yet another long and lyrical melody (see figure 19). This *tranquillo*, almost meditative melody is not a theme of the movement, since it is only used as coda-like closing material. Interestingly enough, this melody appears briefly as a closing to the first main section in measures 60-62.



Figure 19: The closing melody played by the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 149-153.

This movement is driven by the few melodies that Bliss wrote, but the form of the movement is not that simple. Relying on a technique of developing variations, much like Johannes Brahms did, Bliss continually presents familiar material in new ways. As a result, the movement feels almost as if it were through-composed, even though Bliss continually brings back the same melodies in different lengths and derivations.

*Texture.* The second movement presents a variety of textures and sounds that explore fullness and emptiness. In the opening, the string quartet accompaniment provides a bedrock consisting of seventh chords and dissonant note clusters in their lower ranges. The string quartet's volume and presence is tied to the melodic line, and their chords rise and fall in intensity along with the melody.

The full-bodied string sound heard in moments like the opening is paired with sections of near emptiness. For example, measures 36-54 present the listener with sparse ostinati being traded between members of the quartet while the oboe plays theme A over them (see figure 20). Bliss is also able to characterize the frantic nature of the *allegro moderato* section (measures 63-98) with trills, octave leaps, tremolos, and *pizzicato* notes scattered throughout the quartet. The effect would be completely chilling if not for the *dolce* melody divided between the oboe, first violin, and viola. The melodic lines throughout the second movement usually are marked *dolce*, and it serves as a pleasant connection between the prickly or busy accompanimental figures.

Figure 20: Alternating hollow ostinati in the strings. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, second movement, mm. 36-40.

The most notable texture begins in measure 145. A rare moment of homophony signals the beginning of the coda section, where the meditative oboe melody plays over the static seventh chords of the quartet. Unlike the beginning, however, the quartet's part does not flow or swell with the oboe. It remains pianissimo, and the string players do not use vibrato.

Overall, the second movement of Bliss' Quintet provides greater variety of texture and sound than either the first or third movements. Bliss has taken the opportunity to explore the different qualities of sound that a string quartet can create while not going so far as to use extended techniques. Bliss achieves a variety of timbral qualities with the string quartet, and this challenges the oboe to match while playing his long solo melodies.

### Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, Third Movement

Whereas the second movement exhibited a rich, full, and calm persona, the third movement has a frantic, lively, and dark nature. At a vivace tempo in 6/8 time, the music moves at a pace faster than any of the previously heard material in the piece.

*Melody.* The melodic motives in the third movement range from chromatic passages to quotations of folk music. The oboe imitates the chromatic movement of the string quartet through imitation and elaboration (see figure 21).



Figure 21: The oboe's chromatic melody after the strings. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 29-33.

After building up the chromatic tension for the first forty-seven measures, Bliss has the oboe play a more melodic passage that is reminiscent of the previous two movements (see figure 22). Bliss changes the oboe part's meter to 2/4 and has the oboe playing a long florid melody under one long slur once again. Directly opposing this melody are members of the string quartet playing staccato eighth notes in 6/8 time. This same motive returns again in measure 229 at a different pitch level. The accompanying material is also the same as in measure 48.

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Oboe (Ob.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The Oboe part is in 2/4 time, starting with a *p* dynamic and crescendoing to *f*. The string parts are in 6/8 time, playing a rhythmic accompaniment with staccato notes, also starting at *p* and crescendoing to *fz* (fortissimo). The score spans measures 48 to 51.

Figure 22: The oboe's 2/4 melody with 6/8 string accompaniment. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 48-51.

What happens in measure 95 is a melodic reprieve from this chromatic tension and these oblique melodies. Bliss has directly quoted a folk tune called “Connelly’s Jig,” identifying it by name in the score and demarcating the section with a double bar (see figure 23). The introduction of this quoted material is also the very first time in the piece that Bliss wrote a key signature. This clarifies the tonality of the quoted material while also demonstrating that Bliss’s original music in the rest of the piece is not tied down to consistent tonal centers. The oboe plays three different phrases of “Connelly’s Jig” with a member of the quartet repeating the same phrase directly after the oboe has finished. In between statements of the jig, as well as during the string players’ repetitions, Bliss inserts transitional statements and countermelodies that remind the listener of the heavy and cold chromaticism from the first 94 measures.

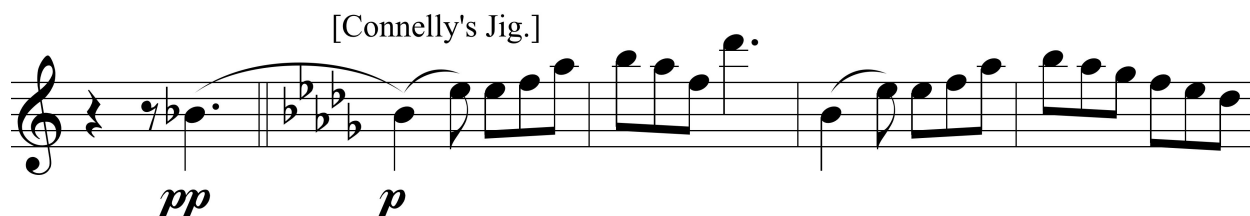


Figure 23: “Connelly’s Jig” in the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 95-99.

The final third of the movement is a recapitulation of material from the first main section of the movement, as well as brief quotes of the jig. Bliss has altered the rhythm of the opening sections to make it sound more frantic and fast-paced, as the oboe and violin play sixteenth notes instead of triplet eighth notes. The chromatic tension ultimately wins out when the oboe part explodes into its final statements to end the movement (see figure 24). Bliss has taken the rhythm and contour of “Connelly’s Jig” and imprinted a chromatic melody onto it. Bliss further exclaims this dark-sounding ending by writing *forzando pizzicato* interruptions in the string quartet while the oboe plays this melody alone.



Figure 24: The final driving oboe motive until the end of the movement. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 348-353.

*Texture.* From the opening measure, Bliss sets up the tone of the movement by having all members of the string quartet play in unison, something which has not occurred since the dramatic build-up to the climax of the first movement (measures 140-142). The chromatic harmonies—along with the fortissimo dynamic, *con forza* marking, and vivace tempo—put the

texture and tone of this movement at the polar opposite of where the second movement ended. The forcefulness of the movement plays itself out at measure 86, when the dynamic level drops suddenly to piano and the performers are instructed to play *dolce*. This is a precursor to “Connelly’s Jig” in measure 95, and the accompaniment is very sparse in comparison to measures 1 through 85. The real focus during the jig is the jig itself, and the accompanying pianissimo quarter notes are playful little interjections that add a lighter flair to the character.

This texture gradually fills in with thicker accompanying gestures as each part of the jig is presented by the oboe and repeated by a member of the string quartet. This culminates in measures 180-207, as the strings play tremolo half notes while the oboe quotes part of the jig. The tension is released by *sforzando* eighth notes followed immediately by pianissimo half notes nearly two octaves lower (see figure 25). All the while, the oboe is holding a long high C. This sudden moment of warmth is reminiscent of the second movement, but the moment only lasts for fourteen measures before the third movement’s icy motives return.



Figure 25: Sudden register and texture changes in strings. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movement, mm. 192-198.

Overall, this climactic movement presents a colder sound and texture than the preceding movements. It stands in stark opposition to the tranquil, mellow second movement. The inclusion of “Connelly’s Jig” serves to lighten the mood, but the final measures of the piece show that Bliss altered this “catchy” tune so much as to make it nearly unrecognizable.

*Rhythm.* The main rhythmic focus of the third movement is eighth notes in 6/8 time. Bliss must have made the decision to center the rhythmic forces and tempo around these elements because of the jig. The listener may not be initially aware of the dance-like quality of the movement because of the chromaticism, but the statement of “Connelly’s Jig” in measure 95 solidifies the prevailing rhythm of eighth notes in 6/8 time. The only real changes occur from a melodic and textural perspective. Occasionally, Bliss alters the status quo by introducing duple

against triple rhythms. In figure 22 (above), Bliss writes the oboe melody in 2/4 time while the accompanying string parts play constant eighth notes in 6/8 time. Bliss also occasionally adds flair with notated ornamentation, which is a practice carried over from the first and second movements (see figure 26).



Figure 26: Written ornamentation in the oboe. Bliss, Quintet for Oboe and Strings, third movements, mm. 168-174.

Additionally, the return of previously heard melodic material (starting in measure 229) brings with it an increase in the tension. Most notably, the melodic conversation between the oboe and first violin in measure 66 returns in measure 256 with a faster rhythm. The first occurrence was simple eighth notes in 6/8, but for the return Bliss has written sixteenth notes in 2/4 time.

In measures 275-296, Bliss splits the time signatures of the string quartet as they play constant *pizzicato* eighth notes with carefully placed accents. Meanwhile, the first two measures of “Connelly’s Jig” are traded between all the members of the group until each player has had a turn. The accompanying *pizzicato* parts alternate between 7/8, 5/8, and 3/4 meters. All the while, the brief jig melody is always in 6/8 meter. The anchor that keeps these seemingly independent parts together is the eighth note pulse, as it remains constant throughout this section.

With the exception of measures 275-296, the overall rhythmic focus of the movement is not complex. The combination of the triplet rhythms and *vivace* tempo make for a lively, and at

times frantic final movement. The drive and tension does not let up until after the final exclamatory chord rings.

The three movements of Bliss's Quintet do not have any thematic or melodic material that connects them together. Patterns begin to emerge, however. The long and seemingly perplexing melodies in each movement become familiar and comfortable through repetition and rhythmic or harmonic manipulation. Bliss's penchant for decorating melodies with written ornamentation is seen throughout the entire work. Each movement also presents challenges to the string quartet, as he asks for a wide variety of textures and effects. His inclusion of "Connelly's Jig" in the third movement is an outlier compared to the rest of the piece, but it serves as a melodic inspiration for Bliss to manipulate and alter, much like his melodies throughout the work.

### **Conclusions**

Arnold Bax and Arthur Bliss each have their own unique compositional backgrounds and traits. That being said, they both managed to write oboe quintets that are easily comparable. Neither of these three-movement works have an overarching theme that prevails throughout them. Being that both pieces were written for the same oboist, both Bliss and Bax wrote works that alternated between long expressive lines and fast virtuosic passages. Bax kept his original melodic material grounded in his Irish sentimentalities, while Bliss's melodies were more disjunctive with large dissonant leaps. They are works that showcased the virtuosic talent of Goossens while also complementing his soft, dulcet tone.

The Irish tunes in both third movements are another striking comparison. While Bax truly saw himself absorbed in Celtic culture, Bliss did not feel the same way. In fact, all Bliss wanted

was a “catchy tune.” Music critic Edwin Evans suggested an old traditional tune that he found in a book of old Irish dances, so in went “Connelly’s Jig.”<sup>34</sup> Those who knew or studied Bax know that his wholly original Irish folk music came from his heart, whereas Bliss had “merely taken a tune out of a book.”<sup>35</sup>

Both of these pieces have received a warm reception from oboists in subsequent years, though their popularity pales in comparison to that of Benjamin Britten’s *Phantasy* Quartet (1934). Britten was only nineteen years old when he wrote the work, and its continued popularity can be attributed to its composer more so than its musical superiority.<sup>36</sup>

The English Musical Renaissance was a time of great exploration and experimentation, and outstanding performers such as Léon Goossens aided this. His interest in renewing the nearly abandoned genre of music for oboe and strings gave contemporary composers such as Bax and Bliss a new creative outlet. Though performed less frequently than the works for oboe and strings by Mozart and Britten, these outstanding quintets by Arnold Bax and Arthur Bliss are deserving of a more prominent standing in the standard repertoire of oboists today.

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<sup>34</sup> Marian Wilson, “Léon Goossens, Oboist,” *The Double Reed* 9, no. 3 (1986): 9.

<sup>35</sup> Foreman, *Bax*, 212.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, “Léon Goossens, Oboist,” 9.

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